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SUBJECT: NAJAF DEPUTY GOVERNOR PRAISES USG COLLABORATION, SEEKS INVESTMENT, BUSINESS

CLASSIFIED BY: Angus Simmons, Team Leader, PRT Najaf, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (U) This is a PRT Najaf cable.

[1](#)2. (C) SUMMARY: During an October 31, 2007 meeting in Najaf with PRT Najaf Team Leader, PRT Engineer, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Gulf Region South (GRS) Engineers, the Najaf Deputy Governor praised the supportive role the USG is playing in Najaf, while commending GRS for their professional implementation of reconstruction projects. The Deputy Governor also expressed his urgent desire to bring U.S. investment and business to Najaf. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)3. (C) On October 31, 2007, PRT Najaf Team Leader, PRT Engineer and GRS Engineers drove from REO Hillah to the Governor's compound in Najaf, marking the first such ground movement to the province in approximately one year. At the meeting, Najaf Deputy Governor Abdul Hussein Baqir Abtan, Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), expressed his gratitude for USG support for Najaf in the areas of reconstruction, security, governance and economic development, and voiced his appreciation for the respect that U.S. officials have shown the Najaf government. Abtan noted that "extremists" in Najaf routinely accuse the provincial government of being pawns of the US. The Deputy Governor explained that he strives to correct such misperceptions, explaining to those who will listen that the Najaf government makes the decisions in the province. He added that in 2006 in England, he attended a conference on Iraq reconstruction at which he spoke positively about U.S. support in Najaf, much to the surprise of the conference attendees.

[1](#)4. (C) Abtan further commended the manner in which GRS is managing construction projects in Najaf. GRS Engineers reiterated that the provincial government and GRS are partners in reconstruction. The Deputy Governor and GRS Engineers agreed to work together to ensure that a thorough operation and maintenance plan is in place for every project prior to handing it over to Najaf officials.

[1](#)5. (C) The Deputy Governor expressed his urgent desire to bring foreign investment and business to Najaf. Acknowledging that the tenuous security situation in Najaf would make it unlikely that a foreign company would set up shop in the province, the Deputy Governor suggested a model of joint ownership where foreign companies would work through Najaf partners. Abtan said that during a recent Baghdad meeting, the South Korean Ambassador to Iraq was encouraging of the Deputy Governor's strategy; plans are underway, according to Abtan, to organize a trip for the Deputy Governor and his entourage to South Korea to meet potential Korean investors. Abtan said he would welcome a similar opportunity to travel to the U.S. to develop strategic investment and business relationships.

16. (C) Abtan said that he was committed to making Najaf a model province in Iraq. His vision includes not only the completion of the Najaf Airport, but also modern development on the banks of Lake Najaf (Bahar an-Najaf), an exhibition showground, and the empowerment of the private sector, among numerous other activities and projects. Responding to the Team Leader's offer to arrange a meeting with the U.S. Commercial Minister in Iraq, the Deputy Governor enthusiastically suggested that the discussion take place as quickly as possible, preferably by next week.

17. (C) COMMENT: In previous conversations with PRTOffs, the Deputy Governor has acknowledged local accusations that his relationship with the USG suffers because of his Badr Corps membership and years spent living in Iran. Abtan appears eager to overcome this perception and build a closer relationship with the USG. Notwithstanding his background, he is an efficient, tough, no-nonsense leader. His hard-charging style complements the urbane and gracious provincial leadership of Governor Al-Ta'ie, who lived many years in Finland. Thanks in part to their partnership and leadership, Najaf is well-positioned for significant economic growth and stability (Note: During the drive to Najaf and back, the construction and economic activity in the province was striking.) Armed with the draft of Boeing's report on the Najaf Airport Project (due to be released to Najaf next week), Najaf hopes to open the airport in 2008. The active pursuit of investment and business, both domestic and foreign, would be a logical complement to the airport lynchpin. It is a positive development that Deputy Governor Abtan is ready to look toward developing business ties with Korea and the U.S. and facilitating a visit by his Najaf delegation to the U.S. could be a key step towards a more prosperous Najaf with a more pluralistic internationalist outlook. END COMMENT.

SIMMONS